

THE WHITE HOUSE
WASHINGTON

8/19

Chet:

Would some one like George
Carver like to try a hand at a
thorough answer which could
be used as a memo and enclosed
under two lines to this and other
critics (your own memo on Morse
was first rate--but you are busy).

McG. B.

MEMORANDUM

Approved For Release 2004/09/23 : CIA-RDP80R01720R000500020043-4

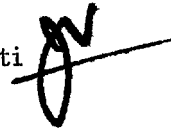
THE WHITE HOUSE
WASHINGTON

Wednesday, August 18, 1965
5:00p.m.

MEMORANDUM FOR MAC BUNDY

For handling by you.

Jack Valenti



Chub:

would some one like

George Conner like to

try a hand at a thorough

answer which could be used as a

memo to this & enclosed under

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(you are memo in March was first note -
but you are busy),

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STAT

The President
The White House
Washington, D. C.

Dear Mr. President:

I do appreciate your courtesy in replying to my telegram of July 23.

You ask the cooperation of people like myself in uniting the country behind your Administration's policy in Vietnam. I would gladly do so if you would give me data substantiating your view that the basic problem is North Vietnamese aggression. I am strongly in favor of resisting unprovoked aggression when our cause is just, even if it risks all-out war. I was an early advocate of standing up to Hitler and a vigorous supporter of NATO and of the Korean War.

But what dismays me - and many, many others - is the startling discrepancy between your Administration's interpretation of the cause of the trouble in Vietnam, and the interpretation of reporters, historians and other professionals who have not been under any obligation to support U. S. policy. They agree in general about the following sequence. After the Vietnamese, under the leadership of Ho Chi Minh, defeated the French, the Geneva agreement divided the country temporarily into two zones, for the protection of the French colonists and the minority of Vietnamese who supported them, but specified an election in 1956 which was expected to reunite the two zones. President Eisenhower himself said that 80% of the people even in South Vietnam would vote for union under Ho Chi Minh. But Secretary Dulles, hoping he might keep South Vietnam from joining the North, helped to find and install Diem as premier, violated his promise not to obstruct the Geneva agreement and encouraged Diem to cancel the election. So it was the U. S. and the Diem governments which blocked a peaceful and democratic solution -- not North Vietnam.

This wrong might have been redeemed if Diem had been able to institute policies which would win the support of the people. But he turned out to be a cruel, suspicious tyrant who progressively alienated the population. (Read any history of the Diem government.) The Vietcong revolt, led mainly but not exclusively by Communists,

The President

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began and spread because so many of the people resented the corruption, oppression and cruelty of the Diem government. All the historians I've read agree that the revolt started among the South Vietnamese people. Only later did it receive weapons and training assistance from the North and later still, recruits. (There is nothing inherently sinister or aggressive in such support. If the Northern and Southern States of the U. S. were temporarily separated and if a civil war then developed in the South between a faction supported by a minority of citizens and a powerful foreign government and a faction containing the majority of citizens, we would not think of it as aggression if the government in the North gave support to the majority in the South with which it was sympathetic.)

I vehemently oppose our policy in Vietnam, firstly, because I believe that we have been trying for 10 years to impose on the people of South Vietnam a reactionary dictatorship which a majority of them dislike and many of them hate. (And this is why we keep losing.) I see no substantial basis for our claims that North Vietnam is the primary aggressor, that China is behind it all, that we are fighting for freedom or for the South Vietnamese people as a whole. We are fighting because Dulles made a terrible mistake in 1954; and since then it has seemed to each administration more manly and face-saving, after every reverse, to increase the involvement rather than to admit the error and the injustice of our policy.

Secondly, I oppose our intervention because I believe it is bound to fail in one way or the other. If we should have significant military success (which seems unlikely), the Vietcong would only receive more help from North Vietnam; and North Vietnam would, if in danger, appeal to China or Russia or both. They could not refuse. I know that your advisers doubt that China and Russia will intervene. But it is important to remember that every prediction of the State and Defense Departments since 1956 has proved dead wrong.

If we suffer progressive defeat, the demand in our country to extend the war by air into Hanoi and into China will become irresistible. This will embroil us in an endless, hopeless slaughter (which will soon discredit and defeat the Democratic Party) or could lead at any moment to nuclear annihilation.

Meanwhile all the steps that we are taking work against us. As we take over more of the fighting, we alienate more and more of the South Vietnamese people and soldiers. (All people resent foreign soldiers who are killing their own kind, even in a civil war.) When we bomb and burn not only men but women and children, and their dwellings, we make them fight more fiercely. (Can you imagine America, if it was suffering what we are inflicting on the Vietnamese, asking for negotiations?) Though there is recent evidence that an appreciable percentage of the Vietcong would prefer a degree of eventual independence from North Vietnam, and though all Vietnamese are said to fear China, our escalation of the war is pushing them into each others arms.

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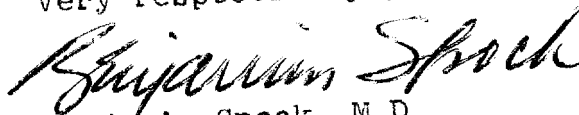
The President

You frequently call attention to the number of times you have offered "unconditional discussions" to North Vietnam and to its failure to respond. I don't claim to read their minds, but if I try to put myself in their position, I can see several plausible reasons. From their point of view, we are a dishonest, aggressive power. We had no legitimate business in their country in the beginning. We interfered to oppose their popular leader, to establish a reactionary regime, and to undo an international agreement that would have brought unity and peace. We refuse to recognize the Vietcong, our main opponents, and want North Vietnam to admit that it started the civil war, which it did not. They probably assume that when you speak of a free and independent South Vietnam, you mean that the regime we support and they distrust must be maintained and that we demand a permanent division of their country. Though we talk of wanting to negotiate, we emphasize it with an intensification of the war -- in extent and in cruelty -- an approach which would enrage any nation worth its salt.

I am fairly sure that if you and I were Vietnamese and had a choice between a reactionary military dictatorship which in a decade had done nothing substantial for the welfare of its people and was kept in power by a foreign nation, and, on the other hand, a Communist dictatorship that had given land to the farmers, built industries, and was headed by the man who had successfully fought the Japanese and the French, we would be on the Vietcong side. (Poor people in underdeveloped countries have no reason to feel threatened by Communism as a system, the way Americans and Europeans do.)

I agree with you that we owe it to the Saigon government and to the minority of the people who support them not to abandon them to the mercies of the Vietcong. (I know that their cruelty has matched the cruelty of the South Vietnam army.) But we could ask the Geneva agreement signatories or the U. N. to set up a system to protect the Saigon people while an election is being prepared; or we could take pains to convince the Vietcong and North Vietnam that we are really prepared to leave their country as soon as a system is established which will protect the Saigon people and which will give all the South Vietnamese an opportunity to choose their own future. I believe that if we showed our good faith in some such way -- and by stopping our bombing at the same time -- progress could be made on a cease fire and a just peace.

Very respectfully yours,



Benjamin Spock, M.D.